

We Happy Few by leighwrites

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Summary:

[Based off the concept of the game 'we happy few'] Derry's not like any other town you've read about. The residents are forced into a sleepy state of hypnosis and faked happiness due to a drug called 'Pennywise' code named: Vitamin P. But what happens when you stop taking the medication and the bright colours and noise fade away?

Stanley Uris has always taken the medication without question like a good boy. Richie Tozier has never been on it and somehow managed to convince the world around him that he's just like them. The day Stan bumps into Richie into the school bathroom is the day that Stan finally starts to question everything; starting with what happens when you don't take your medication.

1. Chapter 1

Stanley Uris had always kept to the routine that was set them in Derry and he'd never once questioned it. No one did. He would wake up to a dark and dreary looking world, reach for the bottle of bright yellow pills on his nightstand, pop one into his mouth, his world would explode into colour, and then he would get ready for the day.

He had never stopped to consider what would happen if he missed a pill, because it had never occurred him that anything was *wrong* . It was *normal* in Derry to be administered a special vitamin once you reached the age of thirteen. No one had ever *asked* about it, and the one time Stan had asked, his mother had just said that it was for his own good.

And the people who refused to take the medication (which had only been a few recorded people here and there) were found out and dragged off to Juniper. And he'd never stopped to consider *why* that was. He had never once wondered if there was something *wrong* in Derry, or just *what* the medication did, or even why the world seemed much darker before he'd actually taken in.

He'd certainly never stopped to wonder if the happy bouncing students around him with their bright smiles and cheerful contagious laughter were *fake*.

And Stan *definitely* didn't know that the first day he spoke to Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, and Richie Tozier (at least that he could remember) would bring the horrible truth about Vitamin P (which scientifically was known as *Pennywise*) down on him.

Stan's day had started the same way it always had. He'd gone to school, done his morning classes, and then gone to the bathroom when he'd noticed the world around him starting to darken, followed by a soft beeping from the watch on his wrist.

" Medicate immediately... medicate immediately. "

Stan tossed his backpack onto the sink unit and unzipped it hastily, hunting out the clear tub of pills from one of the inside pockets. The

bright colours in his vision were fading faster now, the watch getting louder with each beep and demand to be medicated, and the panic rose in his chest when he just *couldn't find the medication*.

The stall to the end of the bathroom opened with a clatter and the sound of someone rushing over to where he stood barely reached his ears. The bag was snatched from his hand and the newcomer started to root through the contents, finally finding the tub of pills under a binder stuffed full of Stan's math work.

"Here." The stranger unscrewed the cap quickly, dropping Stan's backpack to the floor as he fished out two of the pills and handed them over.

Stan stared at the other boy for a moment, taking careful note on the lack of natural grin that should have been present on his face like with everyone else, and the way his bright wardrobe stuck out against his darkening world. The boy's brows were furrowed, the hand with the tub in them lifting to nudge thick glasses back up his face.

Stan knew this boy. Richie Tozier. He was loud and always cracking a joke about something but... he didn't look like he was in a joke cracking mood right now. His face was set into a neutral expression and he looked almost... *tired* .

And then it hit Stan. He was one *them* . The people who refused to take the pills for whatever reason. One of the people who *should* be dragged off to Juniper, but hadn't been. *Because he was faking it*.

"You're -"

The boy shoved the pills into one of Stan's hands. "Shut up. Don't you *dare* fucking say anything else Uris. Not to me or anyone, you got that? Just take your medication like a good boy."

Stan was suddenly aware of the beeping from his wrist again and raised his hand to his mouth quickly, dry swallowing the pills while Richie grimaced and screwed the cap back onto the pills which he handed back to Stan.

"Thanks." Stan shoved the pills into a pocket on the front of his backpack as he retrieved it from the floor, and the world around him was getting brighter now.

"It's a hypnotic, you know." Richie said, his voice sounding far away. "You shouldn't let a pill tell you how you see the world or how you should feel. I prefer my emotions to be genuine. This town and everyone in it is fucked."

"Why would you tell me this?"

Richie chuckled. "Because you won't remember until the world is quiet again and by then you'll think you just imagined it."

Stan didn't understand Richie's words and he didn't need to. As soon as the medication kicked in, his brain was foggy and giddy, and Richie was now grinning at him. Stan furrowed his brow, but the emotion of confusion suddenly felt lost to him; replaced with happiness.

Instead he smiled, shouldered his backpack, thanked Richie (for what though?) and left the bathroom.

The moment he was gone, Richie's grin faded into a frown and another stall opened as Eddie emerged, a wary look on his face.

"Richie -"

Richie raised a hand to cut him off. "Don't."

"But -"

"I said *don't* . I know. I *know*. I should have - but I can't - he's not ready. He still doesn't - *he's just not ready okay?* "

Eddie crossed his arms with a frown. "That's stupid and you fucking know it Richie. No one is ever ready to come off it to..." Eddie waved his hand around them to the somewhat dark and bland room that he had once seen as a vibrant white and green, "this."

Richie was still frowning, staring at the bathroom door as though it held all the answers for him. "I wouldn't know."

Eddie's face suddenly softened, and he found himself standing behind Richie, wrapping his arms around him in a hug. "I know. I'm sorry. This must be hard for you. You lived in this darker reality while everyone else was in that sleepy state."

Richie grimaced. "It was horrible Eds... watching you all laughing and smiling... knowing it was fake and you couldn't feel anything else...."

Eddie sighed, pressing his forehead against Richie's back. "But we can now... because of you. You helped us, and you have to help them too but... you're not alone this time. We're here to help you."

Richie nodded stiffly, placing his hands against Eddie's arms as they tightened around him. "Right. Are you ready to go back out there and fake it?"

Eddie nodded, grinning as he pulled back from Richie and circling around to stand in front of him. "I'm ready. *Are you?* You look exhausted."

"I am, but this is how it's been since I was thirteen. It's been four years, Eds, I can handle one more."

"If you call me that one more time I'll sic Bill on you."

Richie held up his hands defensively with a grin. "Right, right, got it. Last thing I need is Bill Denbrough attacking me in your honor."

Eddie snorted but said nothing, handing Richie his backpack which he'd tossed into the stall where Eddie was when he'd heard the door opening before diving into the wrong one himself to hide.

Richie heaved a sigh and shouldered the bag, his face breaking out into a grin as he shoved the bathroom door open and stepped into the hallway. "What's up fuckers?"

Eddie rolled his eyes, almost fondly, and put on his best fake grin as he left the bathroom after Richie with a laugh. "Shut up Trashmouth."

It was in math class when Stan felt someone tapping his shoulder,

and he turned to see the grinning face of Bill Denbrough who sat right behind him.

“Do you have a spare pencil? I lost mine.”

Stan retrieved a pencil from his desk and handed it to Bill with a grin of his own. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

And then something curious happened. Bill’s grin turned into a frown. *That* wasn’t normal, but Stan couldn’t figure out how or why. Everyone in Derry was always happy. It was *the happiest place in the United States*.

“It’s all in your head, Stan.” Bill’s tone was serious, but the concept was lost on Stan. He just couldn’t feel anything but happy and giddy.

Instead, Stan laughed. “What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

Stan didn’t understand - he *couldn’t* understand. Bill made no sense. He laughed it off good-naturedly and returned to his work.

And when gym came around and Eddie had floored him with a basketball to the face and a laugh as he helped him up, Stan took note on how *his* smile faded too while his back was to the court, but Stan couldn’t place the emotion that was radiating off Eddie.

“You need to wake up.”

Again, Stan could only laugh. “I *am* awake Eddie. I thought I was the one who just had their brain rattled, not you.”

“I’m serious Stanley.” Eddie waved around them. “This is *fake* . It’s *bullshit*. The medication is *shit* . We woke up and you have to wake up too.”

And then it suddenly hit Stan. Bill and Eddie were unmedicated. They weren’t on their Vitamins. The doctor had told him that people who didn’t take them regressed into some weird state where they said

weird things that made no sense and felt things different to the rest of Derry.

The doctor had called them sick.

And Stan suddenly remembered the fliers all over town; bright yellow with a red font.

Those not on Vitamin P are sick and contagious. They must be reported at all times.

Stan took a step back from Eddie, but the smile was still on his face. "You're not -"

"Sh, Stan no! You can't report us!" Eddie hissed, taking a step closer. " *You can't*. You can trust us. We're not sick."

We're awake.

The words stuck in Stan's brain that night as he brushed his teeth in a darkening bathroom while his watch beeped. He reached out for the medication, his fingers stopping short of the bottle.

What happens if you don't take them? Have you seen?

Eddie's question played over and over like a mantra in his mind. His fingers brushed the cap of the bottle which wobbled on the edge of the sink unit.

Don't you want to know?

Did he want to know? He'd never stopped to consider it. The world around him was darkening, and the joyful feeling was leaving him slowly, replaced with confusion and curiosity.

I prefer my emotions to be genuine.

Richie's words came back to him, and it was only now that Stan realised he *wasn't* wearing a watch like everyone else that responded at the perfect time to take Vitamin P. Stan reached for his watch, hastily unbuckling it and tossing it onto the sink unit.

And for the first time in four years... Stanley Uris finally asked the question even if it was to himself.

What the hell did Vitamin P actually do?

2. Chapter 2

Richie had described the unmedicated world as quiet, and Stanley Uris couldn't disagree with him more because it *wasn't* quiet. Though he'd chickened out the night before and taken his medication so he could sleep, Richie's words had come back to him when he'd woken up and Stan hadn't taken his morning dosage.

The happy buzz that was usually ringing in his ears was gone, replaced with an ominous static that vaguely reminded him of a broken radio. He could hear his parents downstairs laughing and joking, the sound barely breaking through the static, and he knew he should be laughing too but he *couldn't*.

There was only static in his mind; almost deafening in a way.

Stan shook his head quickly to try and rid himself of the noise, jumping to his feet and pacing his room with the tub of *Pennywise* in his hand. Everything was different when he wasn't on the medication. The world was darker now, no longer a mass of bright colours that made him feel joyful.

And *fuck* did his jaw hurt.

Stan raised a hand to his jaw, rubbing the area lightly. The sound of the laughter in the kitchen moved, his parents heading into the living room no doubt, and Stan knew that he couldn't get any of his thinking done in this house. Not when his parents could come up at any moment for any reason.

They never actively checked he was on his medication, trusting that their son would always take it like a good little boy because that was just so *Stan*, but if they came into his room to talk to him they would notice if he wasn't and he'd be carted off to Juniper.

He couldn't go there.

He needed to know more.

So Stan did the only thing he knew he could do. He grabbed his

school bag, headed downstairs, put on a fake cheerful voice as he told his parents he was off to the library to study with a friend from school, and then he was out of the house, leaving the fake laughter and his medicated parents behind.

The world outside was just as dark despite the fact spring was rapidly coming to Derry and the sun was shining. He passed a house where an elderly man was mowing his lawn; his movements seeming forced and robotic, and Stan wondered if that's what it was like when he was on the medication too.

It certainly never felt like *his* movements were forced and robotic when he'd been doing them. Stan looked down at his hand, brow furrowed, and flexed his fingers. The movement looked natural and *not* robotic, but one look back at the grinning man and the tune he was whistling, which Stan assumed would sound happy and joyful to anyone drugged up to their damn eyeballs, suddenly sounded fake. Like a badly recorded piece of music that someone was trying to *force* to sound good.

Was that what he'd looked and sounded like to Richie, Eddie, and Bill all this time?

The man slowly looked up, mouth still pulled into a grin as he raised a hand to wave at Stan, his brow knitting (a horrifying look to Stan with that damn grin on his face). Stan quickly pulled the tub of medication from his pocket, unscrewed the cap, took out a single pill and shoved it into his mouth.

The man nodded and then looked back down as Stan hurried up the street. He rounded the corner into Neibolt street and waited until he was outside of the abandoned rundown house (which, *had it always looked so dark and broken?*) before spitting the pill out into the drain in front of it.

Stan's attention was drawn back to the house, staring up at it wonder. He couldn't remember the roof being so caved in, or the worn out boards that were nailed to the windows. Even the overgrown weeds looked so out of place. They were longer and more wild than he remembered them being.

And the iron fence that he'd once seen as almost perfect was in fact *not* perfect. They were rusted, and when Stan reached out to grab the gate; some of the rust crumbled in his hand. Stan released the gate immediately and carried on walking. He needed to be somewhere out of the way.

And this house wasn't far enough.

He soon found himself at the quarry, a place that suddenly felt so familiar to him despite the fact he could recall ever going there. At least not since he'd *started* taking Vitamin P, anyway. No one seemed to be around, and Stan deemed this as a place where he could *really* think, taking a seat at the edge of the cliff with his legs dangling over the edge while he stared down at the water.

It was a bright blue, natural, and Stan had a feeling that it would be even brighter if he was on his medication; enhanced for some reason. That was only thing he *was* sure about when it came to *Pennywise*. The medication made everything clearer and brighter. It made him feel happy.

Was that what it did? Shove a fake feeling of happiness into the body? That's what he could gather how he felt yesterday compared to how he felt *now* . The entire town of Derry (excluding three of his classmates) were on it. But *why* ? What was the point in filling everyone with a false sense of happiness?

And why the *fuck* couldn't he remember anything from before he was put on it?

Rummaging in his backpack, Stan retrieved the watch he'd worn every day since he was thirteen and stared down at its blank screen. It had been a present from his parents on his birthday, and he'd always considered it to be nothing more than a normal watch, never questioning if anything was odd about it.

Until now.

Stan wrapped the watch around his wrist slowly, still staring at the face. The second the back of the watch touched the flesh of his arm, the screen had come to life displaying a bunch of flashing zeroes.

“Medicate immediately... medicate immediately... medicate-”

Stan ripped the watch from his wrist and the screen went blank again and fell silent, confusion settling in as he held it up by the strap, head tilted to one side as he tried to figure out just what the hell kind of watch this was and why it did what it did.

“They do that every six hours so the people around know when you’re unmedicated and can either force you to take the medication or cart you off to Juniper depending on whether or not you resist.”

Stan jumped at the sudden voice, the watch almost falling from his hand. Looking back over his shoulder, he could see Bill standing a few feet away, hands dug into the pockets of his shorts. There was no watch on his wrist, but Stan could see the strap of one sticking out of his pocket.

For a moment the two of them stared at each other, and then Bill was moving; closing the space between them. He took a seat next to Stan at the edge of the cliff, and Stan wondered if Bill had always looked so worn out.

“So... you’re awake now, right?” Bill asked, his hands curling around the edge of the cliff as he leaned forward; staring down at the water. The quarry was the only safe place in town for people like them. The only place where they weren’t under public watch.

Stan sighed, shoving the watch back into his backpack. “I guess?”

Bill smiled. It seemed so genuine and not... *robotic*. “That’s good.”

Stan snorted, his attention drifting back to the water. “Is it? Everything is so -”

“Real.” Bill said, voice firm. “This is what it’s like Stan. This is what it’s like before you take the medication, and when you *don’t* take it. This is reality.”

“What’s the point of it, Bill? I figured out what it does but I don’t know *why* it does it. Why would they need to force happiness into someone like this?”

Bill frowned now, heaving a sigh as he drummed his fingers against the edge of the cliff. "It's a social compliance. If everyone's happy, nothing bad happens. So they made a drug that works like a hypnotic... a hallucinogen... whatever you want to call it... they all result in the same thing. Everyone is a happy robot, and nothing bad happens in Derry."

"In Derry..."

"Derry's not like any other town, Stan. Richie's been outside Derry. Everywhere else has free will. Derry only has it until you're thirteen. The medication takes away free will, free emotions... everything. You've been a grinning, joking, laughing robot for four years, Stan. All of us have... except for Richie. He's been faking it for four years. He's constantly exhausted. When he saw what it was like out there... he swore he'd get his friends back and get us *out*."

Stan tossed his backpack behind him and his attention settled onto Bill. "Why? Why has Richie been faking it for *four* years? Everyone just naturally accepts the medication right?"

Bill was smiling again. "He can't swallow pills, Stan. I thought you knew that... no you *do* know that you just can't remember. The pills make you forget. They do a lot of things, and now you know... what's wrong with Derry... the people..."

Stan groaned and allowed himself to fall backwards until he met the ground with a thump and wince. When was the last time he'd felt *real* pain like that? He wasn't sure. He stared up at the overhead sky, watching the white clusters of clouds move against the blue. He'd never appreciated the sky before. A bird soared overhead, Stan closing his eyes as he released a sigh.

He wanted nothing more than to be that bird. To be completely free.

"Now what?" Stan sat upright, and Bill turned to face him, concern on his face when he could see the panic in Stan's eyes. "I can't be like that anymore knowing it's fake Bill! I saw someone who was medicated today and they just looked like they were on autopilot or something! But I can't... my parents will notice! People will notice, and I can't be dragged off to Juniper! I don't belong there! I'm not

Patrick!"

"Hey, hey, calm down." Bill soothed, reaching out to grab Stan's arm. He needed to keep him grounded to reality. He had to stop him from panicking himself into hyperventilating the way Eddie had. "Listen, it's going to be okay."

"How Bill? This *isn't* okay, it *can't* be okay."

"Stan! Richie, Eddie and myself have been unmedicated for two or more years. Think about that! We're still here! We're not in Juniper! No one is going to take you anywhere! This is what we're going to do. You're going to come with me and we're gonna head to Richie's and -"

"What about his parents?"

"Unmedicated. Have been for a long time. You can't take Vitamin P when you're pregnant. That's when Maggie stopped. She saw reality and unlike everyone else, realised what was going on. Even if Richie *could* swallow pills there's no way they would have let him. So we're gonna go to Richie's, and we're going to calm you down and help you with this."

"H-how?"

"You're gonna learn to fake happiness like the rest of us in the public eye."

Stan nodded, and Bill's hand wrapped around his wrist as he stood; pulling Stan to his feet. Stan grabbed his backpack and shouldered it; allowing Bill to pull him back the way he'd come to the quarry. The rocks shifted and made a scratching sound as Stan stumbled along, and he wondered if Bill had always felt so comforting.

Of course he has. A voice nagged at the back of his mind. *He was the leader of your little group before the medication, how could you forget that? Bill always knows how to comfort you all.*

That's why he was taking him to the one place he knew Stan could *really* relax.

And Stan wondered why the hell he hadn't just gone there first.

3. Chapter 3

“Bill, I really don’t think this is a good idea.” Stan said, following Bill across the bridge that lead into the main part of Derry (it was called *the kissing bridge* if he remembered correctly), taking a wary glance around them. “What if someone notices?”

Bill turned, walking backwards as he grinned at Stan. It was warm and genuine, and Stan found that it didn’t creep him out like the man earlier that day had. “It’s fine Stan. You just smile if anyone is looking or act like you’re taking a pill like you did earlier.”

Stan chewed at the inside of his cheek, not seeming too convinced by Bill’s words. “But-”

“ *Stan .*” Bill stressed, walking towards him now and forcing Stan to stop. “I’ve been unmedicated long enough to know how to do this and not get sent off to Juniper. Look at me. I’m still here. You’re going to be fine. But you have to do *exactly* as I say. If people look at you, smile. If they talk to you, smile, grin, laugh. They can’t tell the difference between a fake smile and a real one. They don’t realise their own are fake. *You’re going to be okay.* Just... trust me okay?”

Stan considered it for a moment before he nodded and they started to walk again, this time side by side, right into the first neighbourhood of Derry. There were a few people out in their gardens, one of which was an old lady who was watering her flowers. She looked up as they passed, the fake smile plastered onto her face; creepy and unsettling.

They returned it quickly and hurried on until Bill was dragging him up the driveway towards a house he didn’t recognize. Bill didn’t knock, but instead pushed the door open and stepped inside, ushering Stan in quickly.

At first, Stan had assumed that this was Bill’s house and they were making a stop for him to grab something, but that was shot down the second Bill closed the door behind them, turned to the stairs, and called out.

“Richie! Eddie!”

Footsteps sounded from upstairs, fast and loud. Stan's breath catching in his throat as Richie appeared first, looking as exhausted as he had in the school bathroom the day before. He stopped short at the foot of the stairs, staring directly at Stan who he hadn't noticed was there at first, Eddie bumping into his back and stumbling back up a couple of steps so he was hovering behind him.

And this, the four of them standing together in a darkened world, felt familiar to Stan. It felt like something he'd done a *thousand* times before, and Stan didn't doubt for a second he *had* but he just couldn't remember.

"Bill -"

Richie was cut off as Eddie squeezed by him suddenly, shoving him to the side before he took an almost defensive position in front of him. Sure, Eddie was a good foot shorter than both Richie and Stan, but it didn't make him any less intimidating.

And sure, Eddie was constantly yelling at Richie for one reason or another, but Richie was still his best friend.

"What were you *thinking* Bill? You know how hard this is for -"

"It's okay Eddie." Bill assured him, his attention shifting from Eddie to Richie. "He's not medicated right now. We're okay. *He's* okay."

Eddie visibly relaxed at Bill's words with a nod. "Right - yeah - sorry Bill. I should have known you wouldn't bring someone who was medicated here."

"I wouldn't risk it. None of us would. We *can't* risk it."

Stan could barely hear the two of them talking. His own attention was on Richie who was *still* staring at him. There was something in Richie's expression that Stan couldn't place, and it *bothered* him. He'd never seen that expression before, but there was something in the back of his mind trying to crawl its way through the static in his mind; attempting to scramble to the surface.

It was *kind* of like a voice, Stan soon realised; an inner one that the static had drowned out for four years.

It was fighting back just like he was.

*Concen. Worry. Caring. You know it you just don't **remember** it because you're not attuned to anything but the fake happiness.*

Stan raised a hand to his head, shoving the heel of palm against his temple where a sudden painful throbbing was settling in and the static raged.

Richie's brow furrowed as he stepped around Eddie. "Stan? Are you okay?"

Bill's attention shifted back to Stan at Richie's words. "Shit. The side effects are already kicking in. I thought he had more time."

Their words didn't reach Stan. The static had become louder, blocking out everything but his own breathing, the throbbing in his head, and the heavy thumping of his heart. He could see Richie moving towards him, the look of concern still on his face as he reached out towards him.

Closer. Closer.

Stan opened his mouth to try and assure them he was fine, but his chest heaved and his hand clamped over his mouth.

No. He wasn't fine.

And they knew that.

"Shit. Richie, get a bucket! Bill! Water! I got him."

Everything had started to blur as someone grabbed him by the arm. *Eddie*, he realised by blurred image of a shorter person standing directly in front of him. Eddie secured his grip on Stan's arm and dragged him towards the living room; Stan's stumbling along with him.

He could hear the sound of someone in the kitchen opening and closing cupboards almost frantically, and the next thing he was aware of was Eddie shoving him down onto the sofa in Richie's living room.

“You need to lie down.” Eddie’s tone was firm. “Close your eyes, and take in some deep calming breaths before the dizziness sets in.”

Stan did as Eddie instructed, only opening his eyes again when the other told him it was okay to. Richie had returned, bucket in hand, and once Eddie had helped Stan to sit upright again, the bucket was shoved into his lap.

Bill returned as the vomiting started, glass of water held firmly in his hand. “I hate these side effects. You’re lucky, Richie.”

“Am I really *that* lucky when I have to watch you guys go through this shit? When I have to watch *him* go through it?” Richie snapped over his shoulder.

Sure Richie had *never* been on the medication because he couldn’t physically swallow the pills, but that didn’t make it any easier for him like Bill often assumed it did. Richie was forced to watch his friends walk around on a simulated happy high like zombies, and then he was forced to watch the recovery process once he broke them out of it.

Because they *deserved* to be free.

“It’s like when I tried to stop for good.” Eddie said, taking a seat on the sofa next to Stan and carefully placing a hand to his back. “Richie, he can’t do this the way Bill did. We have to wean him off the medication like you’re doing with me.”

“I *know* that Eddie, but we can’t send him home like this tonight.” Richie said, motioning to Stan who was still emptying the contents of his stomach into the bucket. “Look at him. There’s no way his parents *won’t* notice that.”

“Then he’s going to have to stay here.” Eddie rubbed his hand carefully against Stan’s back. “I can’t take him back with me to mine. Not like this. Mom will notice and then it’s off to Juniper for him.”

It was logical, and Richie knew that.

Eddie’s mother wouldn’t hesitate to send Stan to Juniper if she saw him like this. She always followed the rules, and anyone who went to

Juniper either never came back out, or came back out more medicated than ever.

“Can you guys stay here too?” Richie asked almost timidly. “I’m not good with this part of the recovery and my parents are out of town for the weekend looking for, well, you know.”

And yes, they *did* know. Maggie and Wentworth were looking at places outside of the city for when their son was old enough to leave. Their plan had originally been to just leave Derry, move them and their son away from this hell, but Richie kept refusing to go anywhere without his friends. He couldn’t leave them like this.

And even though it put Richie under constant threat of being discovered as unmedicated, their plan changed to them finding an apartment they could give to Richie the moment he graduated.

For most of his friends it would serve as a temporary home until they could get somewhere of their own, though Eddie and Bill had been constantly saving every little bit of money they could. If they did everything right, there would be seven of them, and seven of them living in a small confined space for a long period of time wasn’t an ideal set up .

But that was still around six months away, and it was a long time to fake being medicated like the rest of Derry.

“Yeah, Rich, we’ll stay and help you.” Eddie assured, his hand still rubbing at Stan’s back.

Richie shot him a grateful smile. Their group never gave up on each other. Not when they were kids getting pushed around by bigger kids, and not even now when most of them were under the sleepy state of *Pennywise* .

“Hey, how are you feeling now?” Eddie asked as Stan finally raised his head from the bucket.

Stan furrowed his brow, considering it for a moment before speaking. “Like crap.”

“That sounds about right.” Bill offered him a comforting smile,

holding out the glass of water towards Stan. "Eddie was the same."

"You weren't?"

"No, and we're not sure why. I guess different kinds of people react in different ways. Like Patrick. He didn't adjust well when he stopped taking the medication."

"W-what happened with him anyway?"

Richie grimaced, perching himself on the arm of the sofa on Stan's other side. "He went bat-crap crazy. He forgot to take the medication one day, discovered reality, and just didn't adjust well at all. Eddie thinks that some people can't and they get scrambled. He just... snapped and started killing and -"

"They used it to their advantage by saying anyone who isn't medicated is dangerous."

"You got it, Staniel!" Richie clapped him on the shoulder with a grin. "But look at the us. We're not dangerous and, I can't speak for Eddie or Bill, but I'm not about to stuff a fridge full of the body parts of my victims."

"So... some people can't..."

Eddie shook his head. "No. They just snap. When you go a long time feeling almost nothing, and then you try to experience too much too soon... you overload your brain."

Stan visibly paled, his hand tightening around the glass of water. "But what if -"

"It won't." Richie sounded determined, moving fast to take the glass from Stan as he ducked his head towards the bucket again. "We won't let that happen to you, Stan. We're gonna take care of you and help you adjust but you have to trust us."

And Stan found that despite all the rumours and stigma drummed into his head that surrounded anyone who was unmedicated because of people like Patrick that he *did* trust them.

Completely.

Because without the three of them he'd still be medicated and living in an illusionary Derry that was bright and 'happy'.

"Since you're reacting the same way Eddie did, we're going to have to wean you off the medication though." Bill said slowly, sharing a glance with Eddie. "It's not too bad you just... take *half* a pill when you're supposed to."

Eddie nodded, his fingers drumming lightly against Stan's shirt. "It makes you feel a little giddy like you're having a really good buzz. I find that it's easier to fake the happiness like that. The only difference is that you'll have free reign over what you're feeling and thinking. We know the last thing you want right now is to go back on the pills but -"

Stan's fingers tapped against the sides of the bucket. "You'll be there right?"

Richie smiled and reached out, placing a comforting hand to Stan's shoulder. "Every step of the way Stan. We won't leave you."

Bill nodded. "That's right. We'll be there with you every minute of the recovery. Weaning you off is a better play anyway. Half a pill will be enough to fool your parents. It works for Eddie. His mom still thinks he's as medicated as the rest of Derry."

4. Chapter 4

Beverly Marsh tied her hair up into a loose ponytail and smoothed out her dress, her eyes fixed on the tub of medication sitting at the edge of the sink unit with her name printed on the label. As she did every morning, she unscrewed the cap from the tub, fished out a single pill, and then dropped it into the toilet before flushing it.

Beverly had never conformed to the rule of being medicated, and her parents (as well as everyone else around her) were none-the-wiser about it.

Because Beverly was always happy. The feeling of freedom and free reign over her emotions made her happy.

Grabbing her backpack, Beverly skipped from the bathroom, heading into the kitchen and giving her mother a quick peck on the cheek. "I'm heading out for a few hours, mom. For my refills."

Elfrida Marsh beamed at her daughter, turning from the dishes she was washing and pecking her once on the forehead. "Okay sweetie!"

"Love you mom!" Beverly called over her shoulder as she left the kitchen and passed through the living room. "I'll be home by three!"

She breathed in a sigh of relief as she closed the door to their apartment behind her, her face breaking out into a grin. Freedom was the best feeling in the world.

With a bright happy smile on her face, Beverly skipped down the metallic steps of the apartment block, grabbed her bike, and rode into town. True to her word, Beverly made a stop at the pharmacy to get her refills, humming to herself the whole time while the woman retrieved her next tub for the following month, tucking it into a small white bag before handing it over with a forced smile plastered onto her face.

And yes, Beverly hated that everyone around her was drugged up on the medication. It was a lonely life. She didn't have friends or anyone to talk to, but she was *free*. Everything she felt was genuine.

And she wouldn't trade her freedom for the sake of being drugged up just to have friends.

Beverly stopped pedaling her bike, allowing herself to glide across the kissing bridge with ease; the wind whipping her ponytail back like a flowing red banner. It was only when she reached the other side of the bridge that she took the handlebars again and veered off to the side down an embankment.

The barrens had become a kind of safe haven for her over the years. A place where no one could see her long enough to figure out that she wasn't medicated like the rest of them. She dumped her bike in some tall bushes and headed for a large pipe that jutted out from the embankment.

It had once been a part of Derry's sewer system, though the sewer didn't run to this particular part of the barrens anymore, so it and the pipe had dried out. It was easy for her to climb up into the pipe and hide from the world for a few hours before having to go home and fake it.

Taking out her phone, Beverly checked the time to see that it was noon, tapping up her clock and setting an alarm for three in the afternoon before tucking it back into her pocket and hoisting herself up into the pipe, settling against the ridge walls with her backpack next to her.

This was where Beverly came to read books and draw in her sketchbook; away from prying eyes. Such actions had become forbidden in Derry once you were thirteen because they were part of *free thinking*, so Beverly carefully hid a few books and a sketchbook under some loose floorboards beneath her bed the day they had thrown out anything creative from their house.

Today, Beverly had allowed herself to become lost in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Fantasy books had quickly become one of Beverly's favourite things, and she'd read the series a number of times. The outside world itself was a fantasy, and one day she knew that she would get out of this town and *really* be free in every sense of the word.

She would make her own story.

It was around one-thirty in the afternoon when the sound of footsteps caught Beverly's attention, and she snapped her worn copy of *The Horse and His Boy* shut before sinking further back into the pipe so that whoever was passing by wouldn't be able to see her in the darkness.

It wasn't uncommon for there to be weekly patrols of the barrens, and while she could play off being medicated really well, she could not explain why she was hiding in a pipe with *illegal contraband* that would get her into some serious trouble if anyone decided to do a quick search of her person.

They had really been cracking down on everyone since the incident with Patrick.

The sound of the footsteps was soon coupled with laughter, and Beverly *knew* that laughter. It was genuine like her own, and it piqued her curiosity. Carefully, she crept towards the edge of the pipe, listening to the laughter as it became louder. It sounded like there were four of them heading in her direction, but that *couldn't* be right.

How could four people walk around Derry together unmedicated and not get found out? It didn't add up. Surely someone would have noticed by now.

That's why you were better off alone or with only one other person. It was less suspicious.

"I heard they do patrols here once a day." One of the approaching people, a boy, spoke up suddenly. Beverly deduced that they were young, probably around her own age, and she found that her curiosity was becoming even *more* piqued. "We should probably stick to the Quarry from now on or the house on -"

"Don't. I'm not going into that crack house again." Another voice spoke up. "I almost fell through the fucking stairs last time, Richie!"

"I told you to be careful, Eds!"

“Richie’s right though, Eddie.” A third voice piped up. “There aren’t many places where four unmedicated people can hide, and we can’t spend every single day hiding out at his house.”

“But the *Neibolt* house? Really?” Eddie groaned. Their voices were louder now and Beverly took in a sharp breath, listening carefully. “We still have the Quarry, the junkyard, the *trainyard*. Literally anywhere is better than a house I almost died in. The *sewers* would be better than that.”

Beverly watched, her eyes fixed on the area of the barrens just in front of her pipe as the group of boys passed her. There were four of them just like she’d guessed, and she recognised all of them.

Bill was walking alongside Eddie, and the two of them were walking just in front of Richie, who had his arm slung around Stan’s shoulders carelessly, almost directing his movements as they walked.

Now *that* surprised her.

Of all the people she could have *guessed* to be unmedicated, Stan *wasn’t* one of them, but the main thing was that there were people other than herself who were off the weird medication.

She wasn’t alone.

Beverly threw her legs out of the pipe, sitting at the edge with her legs dangling inches from the ground. “He’s right.” She called, grabbing their attention. “They run patrols here at ten in the morning and three in the afternoon every day. It’s not safe.”

None of them responded to her, simply staring as though trying to figure her out. They weren’t too trusting, and Beverly didn’t blame them. They didn’t have a reason to trust her just like *she* didn’t really have a reason to trust *them* .

And yet she did trust them.

“I’m like you. I don’t take the medication. I never have. I come here to read and draw. It was the only place I knew of where I could do that without someone catching me.”

Richie shifted, keeping one arm around Stan with the other moved so he could adjust his glasses, almost squinting at her through them. "How do we know we can trust you?"

"I know what happens to you in Juniper. I can tell you anything you need to know about it" Beverly leaned forward, curling her hands around the edge of the pipe to keep herself steady. "My dad's there."

Richie and Stan exchanged a glance, but it was the latter who decided to ask the question. "What happens to you in Juniper?"

Beverly frowned, reaching back to grab her backpack before she slid from the pipe; feet lightly thumping against the ground. "It's a correctional facility. If you get taken there they... they use surgery to make your smile permanent."

"What *else* do you know?" Eddie asked, taking a step forward.

"I know everything I need to know. Who is in the ministry of joy, what's in *Pennywise* , the *other* things they do in Juniper and why they do it. I know *everything* . You can trust me. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

5. Chapter 5

“Hold on a second. So... they do all of *this* because it makes for a better society?” Richie asked, stretching his long legs out over his kitchen countertop with his head resting against the cupboard attached to the corner behind him.

It had been one whole week since they had met Beverly in the Barrens when she’d been hiding in one of the pipes away from everyone in the town, and she had quickly become one of the group; fitting in with them perfectly to the point that Stan couldn’t imagine a time when she *wasn’t* around.

“They took it from some kind of old German practice.” Beverly said, looking up from her sketch to Richie; twiddling her pencil between her fingers. “I think they called it *Strength through fun*. They scrapped the idea though when they lost the war and it surfaced again some years later in England.”

Bill dropped the piece of toast he’d been eating onto his plate. “*England* ? Then how the hell did it get *here* ?”

“Well...” Beverly placed her pencil down onto her sketchbook with a soft sigh. “A man named Doctor Kellman originally restarted the project. He founded something called the Ministry of Joy because he thought they could cure insanity with a smile and it would turn them into productive members of society. He he used various methods on people in the asylum to try and achieve this but as you can imagine... it didn’t work, and when they found out what he was doing he was arrested for his inhumane crimes against the patients and his Ministry was disbanded.”

Stan listened intently to Beverly’s story. He had never imagined that whatever was happening around them in Derry went as far back as wartime Germany. Beverly was staring down at the sketchbook, her brow knitted, and he knew that this wasn’t where it ended. There was more for her to tell before she reached Derry.

Beverly took in a deep breath, the tips of her fingers nervously rapping against the kitchen table. “The Ministry of Joy was re-

founded fifty years after Doctor Kellman's arrested. What he did to those patients was disgusting and inhumane but... they felt like he had had a good concept. Social Compliance through smiling. Didn't you notice how in every theme park everyone is always happy no matter the mood they started off with? No one does anything *bad* there. That was the start of the Ministry of Joy's experiments."

Eddie choked on his soda. " *What ?*"

"There is a theme park in England... it dates back long enough but... even without that... it's built around the remains of the Asylum where Doctor Kellman worked. The place called *The Sanctuary*. "

"Holy shit." Richie breathed, pushing up from the cupboard and swinging his legs over the counter. "Are you serious? That asylum is *still* there right now? Like... right this second?"

"Yes." Beverly looked up again, eyes wide and brow knitting once more. "And... Doctor Kellman's family continued his research. They run the Ministry of Joy. There is an entire town in England overseen by the descendants of his daughter that lives in a sleepy state just like Derry by the name of Alton."

"And... the drug?"

"I'm getting there Richie. See, his daughter remained in England in Alton to continue his work, but his son didn't. His son moved here... to Derry. He wiped it off the map and continued his father's experiments. *His* son, Doctor Robert Gray, is the one who created the drug known as *Pennywise*. It's full of hallucinogens; LSD, mushrooms... the works. A small dose gives you a buzz but a prescription dose that has you taking it three times a day? It's a hypnotic state. You're never *off* the drugs long enough to really recover and you become reliant on them. That's why everyone reacts differently if they try to come off them. That's why Patrick *snapped* . He had a bad time coming down from the high."

Stan swallowed thickly. It made sense now why he'd been so sick the first two weeks he'd been trying to get off the medication. His body had become reliant on *actual* drugs and refusing to take them even for one day had a negative effect on his body. "And what happens if

someone realises you've stopped taking the medication and cart you off to Juniper?"

Beverly grabbed her sketchbook and flipped to one of the previous pages, holding it up for them to look at. On the page she'd drawn a man whose mouth was stretched open with a set of clips pulled back against his face; the clips themselves tied together with string. "They force you to comply in some sick way of their choosing. This is just the least harmful way for them to do that. They don't give you *Pennywise* in Juniper. They drum it into your head to be like you were on the drug. I know because the last time I went to see my dad... this was the man I saw."

A deathly silence fell over the kitchen as Beverly placed her sketchbook back onto the table. Richie gripped at the edge of the countertop, his knuckles turning white as he stared at the group sitting at his kitchen table. The natural amusement and happiness that was usually in Eddie's eyes had vanished, replaced with something he couldn't quite decipher. Bill had now pushed the remains of his breakfast away, having completely lost his appetite while Stan looked nothing short of terrified.

It was the first time the consequences of being unmedicated had *really* sunk into the group. Until now they hadn't been aware of what happened once you were inside of Juniper. They had always known that their freedom came with a great risk, but now they understood just how great that risk truly was.

If they were caught unmedicated by anyone in the Ministry, Juniper would use *other* means to make them comply.

And now Richie understood how important his parent's work was. He understood why they snuck out of town once a month under the nose of the Ministry. He understood why they made their own house into some kind of a safehouse for his friends as well as their own.

"Richard! How many times have I told you *not* to climb all over the kitchen worktops?" Maggie Tozier entered the kitchen, a bright smile on her face and bags of groceries in hand. "I swear you're like a puppy sometimes."

“Right, sorry.” Richie jumped from the countertop quickly and Beverly snapped her sketchbook shut. “How was -”

The smile faltered from Maggie’s face as she dropped her bags onto the counter where Richie had been sitting. “It was annoying as always... all those fake smiles. Why are you crowding my kitchen when you have a perfectly good bedroom?” She reached out, petting her son’s face in an affectionate manner that made Stan’s chest clench. It wasn’t a fake and medication exchange like with his parents. They were a *real* family. “Go on now, upstairs. I have to clean the house today.”

Richie batted her hand away playfully when she reached up to ruffle his hair. “We can do that for you.”

“No, you really can’t. You’re so tall. All limbs... you’ll do more harm than good you spider monkey. Do you not recall the old vase you broke helping me dust? It’s better that I do this myself.”

“Mom -”

Maggie shoved Richie, a genuine grin on her face. “Go on! Enjoy your day. I didn’t smuggle illegal contraband into my house so you could let it go to waste.”

“Right, yeah. Come on guys.” Richie circled the table as his friends stood, leading them from the kitchen and up to his room.

Once they were inside, Richie closed the door and sank back against it while his friends scattered around his room. He understood now. He *really* understood. Bill took his usual seat at Richie’s desk where there was a stack of comic books lying in a disorganised chaotic mess. Stan and Eddie were already sitting on the edge of the bed, but Beverly hovered for a moment, unsure of what to do.

“Here.” Eddie pet the space between himself and Stan. “You’ll be the first and only girl in Richie’s bed.”

Beverly laughed, dropping into the offered space with her sketchbook clutched to her chest. “It’s weird to see an adult acting the way we are. This house... it really makes me feel safe and free.”

Richie laughed, but there was something off about it. Something that set off an alert in Stan's mind. "Richie?"

"Jesus. Fucking. Christ." Richie breathed.

The group around him exchanged a concerned look before Stan rose to his feet, crossing the room and reaching out to grab Richie's arm; squeezing lightly to get his attention. "Are you okay?" He couldn't think of anything in the exchange with Maggie that would have Richie suddenly like this. She had been nothing but affectionate with him.

Richie looked up, his eyes meeting Stan's. For a moment he didn't speak, simply staring him while his mouth opened and closed; trying to form his current thoughts into words. "I - I get it now."

Stan's brow furrowed as he focused on Richie's face; on the look of confusion and realisation that was mixed into one barely recognisable expression. "Get *what* Richie?"

"I get why my parents keep sneaking out of the town once a month. They're not just looking for a place for me. It's more than that. I think... I think they know what Juniper does too. I think they know what's in the drug. I get why they let anyone unmedicated come here and stay as long as they need or want to. Stan," Richie was gripping at Stan's arm, his nails digging against his flesh, "they're part of a resistance against all of this. The drug. Juniper. Derry itself."

Stan opened his mouth to speak when the sound of Maggie's voice reached them. Richie scrambled from the door, bumping into Stan in the process before grabbing the handle and opening the door enough that Maggie's voice could carry from her bedroom to his own. Through the crack in the door, Richie could see the large mirror in the hallway and Maggie's reflection whenever she walked by her bedroom door; duster in hand.

She was taking on the phone, a hands free device plugged into her ear and her brow furrowed. "You found one? How much? Where? Nouvelle? That's not far enough, L. I need Richie to be as far away from this godforsaken town as possible. His friends too. They're not safe here. No. The group is bigger now. I need a place with three

rooms. Yes, I understand it will be more expensive but that's what I need. If anyone can find me something it's you. I need them far away enough that they can forget about this place just like the others."

Richie slowly closed his door, a quiet click sounding through the silence of his room. Slowly, he turned to face Stan who looked just as surprised as he did. "You - I heard that right?"

Stan nodded slowly, unsurely at first. He was still trying to figure out if *he'd* heard that too. Richie was right. His parents were *definitely* part of some resistance. "Y-yeah, you heard that."

Richie swallowed, the realisation sinking in. The posters of unmedicated wanted children the year before came back to him. Edward Corcoran. Betty Rimpson. Audra Phillips. Patricia Blum. Victor Criss. They weren't dangerous due to lack of medication like the Ministry wanted the medicated to believe they were. Richie already knew that because *he* was unmedicated too. They'd escaped and were free of this town now.

And his parents had been the reason.

Stan placed a hand to Richie's shoulder, breaking him from his realisation and bringing him back to reality. "Richie -"

"The wanted kids. My parents got them out... or helped someone who did and... they're planning to do that to us too."

"It sounded like she wanted to get all of us out at once." Beverly said, clutching her sketchbook tighter against her chest. "How does she plan to sneak five of us out of this town?"

Richie opened and closed his mouth a few times before shaking his head. For the first time since he'd found other unmedicated people in Derry, he didn't have an answer for them.

"How do *they* sneak out?" Bill asked, breaking the silence that had fallen over the room. "It makes sense they'd sneak us out the same way, right?"

Richie shrugged, his voice faltering as he spoke. "I don't know..."

Stan was staring at Richie now, concern written clearly on his face.
“Richie -”

Richie cut Stan off with a nervous chuckle. “You used to look at me like that a lot back then too. Before the medication... before the drug took you away from m - us.”

Before the drug ripped you away from me.

6. Chapter 6

Stan sat at his usual desk in class, tapping his pen nervously against a page in his notebook as his teacher droned on about algebra. He'd never noticed it during his medicated days, but everyone on the medication sounded so monotone when they spoke; just like a robot. He hated it. Was that how *he* sounded whenever he was talking back when he was still taking *pennywise* ? He didn't know, and he didn't want to ask Richie and remind him of the days when he'd had no one because everyone around him was on the simulated happy.

By lunchtime it had become too much and he'd found himself hiding out in the very bathroom where his world had first darkened and Richie had helped him take his medication. Richie was currently standing in one of the stalls, the door wide open since he was cramped inside with Beverly, the two of them sharing a cigarette. Eddie had hoisted himself onto a window ledge and was nestled contently in the space as he read a book that Stan couldn't see the name of, turning the page every few minutes. Bill had taken his residence on the sink unit where he had a good view of the glass pane in the door; keeping watch for them.

"This is too much Richie." Stan said, leaning against the unit behind him. "I don't - I can't handle doing this for the rest of the day."

Richie shared a concerned glance with Beverly, handing the cigarette over to her before he slid out of the stall and crossed the bathroom. "You *can* do it, Stan. You've been doing so well. All you have to do is smile and laugh when people talk to you. Any other time, they're not paying attention to you. It's just a couple more hours."

Stan was gripping at the unit, backpack slipping down his shoulders. "I *can't* . I can't keep *listening* to them and this... this static."

Richie suddenly understood the problem. When they'd started Eddie's weaning process and when Bill had first come off the medication, they'd talked about the static. They'd told Richie how it felt like their brain was a broken radio. Eddie's had been so deafening once that he'd spent a night curled into a ball against Richie with his hands clamped over his ears until Richie had placed a set of headphones on

him and blasted music so loud that it blocked out the noise and allowed Eddie to sleep.

“Is the static really that bad?” Beverly asked, tossing the finished cigarette into the toilet and flushing it. “I’ve never had it.”

“Yeah.” Eddie looked up from his book, placing a hand across the page he’d been reading. “It’s like when you’re trying to tune your radio and you hit that station that you really want but you’re just not quite there yet and it’s crackling; trying to break through the static. Your brain the radio and the real world is that station.”

Bill looked away from the door as Beverly stepped out of the stall. “And it’s so deafening sometimes that it hurts.”

Richie had never had to deal with the static since he’d never been on the medication, but if anyone knew how bad it was for Stan right now, Eddie and Bill did. Richie reached out, curling his arms around Stan and pulling him flush against him. He could feel Stan’s entire body shaking as he gripped at Richie, hoping that the other boy could anchor him into reality and make the static stop. Richie kept one arm around him, moving the other to retrieve his phone from his pocket and untangle his earphones. Releasing him fully, Richie pushed the earbuds into Stan’s ears and held up a finger to tell him to wait a moment as he scrolled through his phone.

It wasn’t long before the sound of *Wonderful World* was invading his ears. Richie tucked the phone into his pocket, lifting his hands and clamping them over the earbuds to block out any extra sound around Stan, a soft smile on his face. Stan stared up at him, nostalgia crashing over him like a tidal wave.

He was twelve years old hanging out in Richie’s backyard. A radio hung from one of the branches of a large tree, dangerously close to falling off, and Richie was dancing in time with the music while Eddie laughed, spread out on a blanket that Richie had retrieved for him.

“You move like a damn spider, Trashmouth.”

*Richie stopped dancing, his attention settling onto Eddie. “What’s **that** supposed to mean?”*

Eddie grinned up at him, using a hand to shield the sun from his eyes. "It means you're all limbs and no grace."

"Oh fuck you Eds!" Richie protested while Bill and Stan broke out into laughter. "I have it on good authority that spiders are actually quite graceful."

The song on the radio changed drastically from the blaring rock to something softer and Richie grinned, grabbing Stan by the hands and pulling him out of his chair to his feet. "You gotta dance with me Stanny! Who knows when someone will ask you again."

Stan groaned but entertained Richie regardless through the awkward slow dance that had Eddie rolling around with laughter. Bill shook his head in amusement, looking up from his sketchbook to watch them. While anyone else would have found it weird, **they** knew that it was just Richie. This was just how he was with people.

I see friends shaking hands saying how do you do,

They're really saying I love you,

"Hey you're gonna be thirteen soon, right Stanny?"

"Yeah, I guess. Doesn't feel like it."

I hear babies crying, I watch them grow,

They'll learn much more than I'll never know,

Richie smiled, staring down at him. "I'm gonna miss you."

Stan furrowed his brow in confusion. "I'm not going anywhere, Rich."

Richie didn't speak, staring down at him with a look that was almost somber. The music faded behind them and Richie released him surprisingly easy. "Goodbye Staniel! Thanks for the dance."

Stan suddenly batted Richie's arms away, yanking out the earbuds and holding them tightly in his hand. He hadn't been aware that his breathing had been picking up, or that he was pretty close to a panic attack until now. He'd been too immersed in the memory to focus on

anything else. He stared up at Richie who stared down at him in confusion, a look that magnified tenfold by his glasses.

“Stan what’s -” Richie was cut off as Stan’s hand slammed over his mouth to silence him.

“There’s something we need to discuss and I want everyone but you to leave so we can do that.”

Eddie and Bill exchanged a look, but Stan’s tone hadn’t left room for discussion. Eddie slid out of his seat, feet hitting the ground with a soft thump as he shoved his book into backpack and then grabbed Beverly’s hand, leading her from the room with Bill close behind. Bill lingered for a moment in the doorway, sending a concerned glance to Richie before he was gone, the door clattering shut behind him.

Stan slowly removed his hand from Richie’s mouth, throwing the earbuds at his chest. “You *knew*! You knew what was going to happen! That’s why you said goodbye!”

Richie barely managed to catch his earbuds before they could hit the ground, his eyes never once leaving Stan. He didn’t speak, simply straightening himself out. Stan looked a mixture of angry and hurt, and Richie wasn’t sure which way this was going to go if he opened his mouth. Sometimes it was better around Stan to just be silent. He’d learned that when he was younger.

Stan shoved Richie backwards, following after him so he could shove him again. “You knew and you - you didn’t do anything! Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you *warn* me?” He punctuated every question with another shove until Richie was forced to move, grabbing the edge of the stall so he didn’t fall over. “Why didn’t you *stop* it?”

Richie straightened himself again, staring down at the other boy. “How was I supposed to stop it? There’s no way that you would have believed me at the time if I’d told you about the medication. I knew that. I knew you’d say it was illogical and it made no sense.”

“So you just... didn’t try?”

“I was *twelve* Stan! I was a scared and helpless child and I didn’t know what to do! I didn’t know you could just... stop taking them! I thought... at the time the only people who stopped taking it were Patrick and Henry and look how they turned out! I didn’t want that to happen to you!”

“But it was okay to take that risk with Bill and Eddie?”

“No, no! I didn’t... Bill got sick, Stan. You can’t mix *pennywise* with other medication. That’s when he’d stopped taking it and realised there was something *wrong* . That’s when he noticed I wasn’t like everyone else. *That* was when I knew there was a way to help you.”

Stan looked on the verge of crying, shoving Richie backwards into the stall. “Then why did it take you so long, Richie!?”

“It didn’t!” Richie defended, finally shoving Stan backwards so he could get out of the stall. “I told you *countless* times but it never made a difference!”

“You... *what* ?”

“You woke up one night unmedicated in your first year and freaked out. You called me, but you don’t remember that. It was when your parents took you out of school. I calmed you down, and I asked you not to take the medication again but then you came back to school a year later and you were ‘happy’ but every time... every time *you* woke up in the middle of the night in a panic you called me, I’d calm you down, beg you not to take the medication, but you did anyway. It always went the same way.”

Stan froze, suddenly remembering seeing a slew of outgoing calls on his phone to a number under the name *Trashmouth* . He began to pat down his pockets until he located his phone, yanking it out and unlocking it before bringing up the recent call list. And there it was, right under a call made to his mother.

Trashmouth (50).

The phone fell from his hand to the floor, hitting the tiles with a clatter.

"I'm scared. I'm alone. I don't understand what's going on Richie. They said I can't come back to school for a year."

*Richie gripped at his phone, staring up at his ceiling. He understood why. Stan was a year older than him because he'd been sick a lot as a child. He was ahead of them when it came to starting the **pennywise** drug.*

"I don't remember making those calls..."

"But you *did* Stan. You made them and I answered every time even when Eddie told me not to."

"Because it was hurting you."

Richie crouched to pick up Stan's phone, holding it out to him. "It was so hard to see you like that all the time... hear that... especially with how I felt."

Stan slowly retrieved his phone, pushing it back into his pocket. "What are you talking about Richie?"

"I *like* you Stan. I have since we were twelve years old. I didn't get what it meant then but over the years it just... intensified. I couldn't stop thinking about you. I hated it when you were scared those nights on the phone. I hated that you just... they keep saying death is the worst thing in the world. It's not. You *forgot me*, Stan, and that's way worse. The moment you started taking that medication, it was like a fog had taken over and you didn't remember who I was until the fog had cleared long enough."

Stan stared almost intensely at Richie as his words sunk in. Richie had never stopped caring about him because he couldn't, and as Stan thought about it, the realisation came crashing down on him. He called Richie whenever he was scared. Not Eddie or Bill, whose numbers had already been in his phone too, but *Richie*. He trusted Richie. Richie made him feel safe. His first night off the medication he'd slept curled up in Richie's arms because he was *comforting*.

And when he thought about Richie in general, there was this odd feeling he couldn't place. Something almost foreign to him.

Richie exhaled softly and when he spoke, Stan could tell he was

trying to hide just how hurt he was. “I get you don’t feel the same. I just - you need to know that, you know?”

Richie stepped around him and Stan reached out, grabbing at his wrist to keep him rooted to the spot. “It’s not that I don’t - I don’t *know* Richie. I - I don’t understand what I feel or what’s going on because I’m still coming off the medication.”

“What you feel?”

“When I think about you part of me wants to strangle the hell out of you and I don’t get it, but there’s another part that just... wants to grab you and never let go and I don’t get *that* either but... if this is feeling... if this is what I get with the static, then the static is worth it because I want to *try* . I want to *understand*. I just... for the first time I don’t *know anything* .”

Richie turned to face him, raising one hand to adjust his glasses. There was a serious look on his face that didn’t seem right. Not on Richie at least. It was almost like he was debating something, and before Stan could ask what was wrong, Richie had closed the space between them and pressed his mouth against Stan’s.

Stan felt the odd foreign feeling again settling into his stomach. It made him feel... *free* . Free of the medication, of the town. It was almost like Richie himself was a drug. The kind that allowed him to be *him* and not some kind of a robot.

Richie pulled back far too quickly for Stan’s liking, once again adjusting his glasses to sit right on his face. “Sorry, I’ve been holding that in for a while.”

“Don’t. I -” Stan paused, taking a moment to try and decipher feeling a little further. “Liked it.”

Richie’s face lit up, and the feeling settled in again. How had he gone for so long without seeing that look on Richie’s face? And *he’d* done that. *He’d* brought that look to his face. “Yeah?”

Stan pushed himself up onto the tips of his feet, connecting his mouth back to Richie’s for a moment. “Yeah.”

7. Chapter 7

Mike Hanlon, like very few others around the town of Derry, had never spent even so much as a *minute* with *Pennywise* in his system. His ancestors had never trusted the drug, and as a result his family had never taken it. Like those hiding under the radar, they picked up the medication from the pharmacy, took it home, and renewed their monthly fill on time, never once raising the suspicions of those around them.

But every single day it got harder and harder to fake it and keep people's suspicions low. Since Patrick had stopped taking the medication and had snapped, killing a bunch of animals and people in the process, the Ministry had *really* clamped down when it came to the medication, and there were only so many times that you could be caught out on the streets 'between your medicine fix' before you quickly became a suspicious possibly unmedicated person.

That's why people like Richie laughed obnoxiously loud at the dumbest thing imaginable and Beverly always had a large smile on her face no matter how they were feeling. It was why Bill constantly grinned and slung an arm around Eddie or Richie, giving them playful shoves with a loud laugh. It was why Eddie laughed at almost anything, and it was why Stan was constantly smiling, walking through the school hand in hand with Beverly to keep up appearances that everything in the town was *perfect* .

As long as you *looked* the part, everything was fine.

The Ministry never saw the change the moment Richie stepped into his house and the smile faltered before he was meeting Stan in a kiss, pressing him against the door and gripping at his hips like he thought the moment he let go he would be gone again, even now, a month after yelling at each other in the bathroom. They never saw the tired expression on Eddie's face as he planted face down onto his bed with a heavy sigh, door closed and eyes staring at the patch of light under it for signs of his mother. She couldn't find out he wasn't taking the medication. If she did, she would send him right off the Juniper with everyone else who resisted. He had to play the part. At least until they could get out.

They were unaware that Bill would collapse onto his bed, frown on his face, the constant fear of being caught unmedicated eating at him as he stared up at the ceiling, tracing the bumps and cracks as he planned out his next day of faking just to make it one extra day without anyone figuring it out. They were tired, but they kept going. They kept up the fake laughs and smiles until the lunch period where they would gather into one of the barely used bathrooms and take a break, offering each other comforting smiles and words that they could do this. They could make it through another day because the day they could leave got closer and closer every day.

But it came to an end. It always did. And it came to an end when Mike was ready to head home for the day after delivering some things to town from the farm. He was always more than happy to take the backstreets out of Derry every time where no one would be able to see him so he could wipe the forced and fake smile from his face and just be him. Be the *genuine* Mike.

He had *not* been expecting someone no older than himself to run out of one of the alleyways and bring him to a skidding halt while they panted heavily with a mass of bedridden blonde hair framing their face; attempting to get their breath back after all of the running. Mike's fingers twitched on the handlebar of his bike, preparing for the flight mode that would follow. He was more than happy to almost knock them down if it meant not getting caught.

Always move so fast they can't tell who you are, Mikey. That's how you stay safe when it's a close call.

The boy wasn't looking at Mike, his body bent forward with his hands pressed to his legs, nails digging in as he tried to ground himself. It gave Mike a chance to scope them out. The hoody they were wearing was baggy; far too baggy for his small frame and long enough to reach just under his thighs, enough to cover most of him, and Mike became aware that they were only wearing boxers. There were no actual pants, almost as if they'd jumped out of bed, yanked on a random hoody, shoved on the first pair of shoes which *didn't match*, and then just ran.

And when the boy finally looked up, Mike was met with intense terrified green eyes that were flecked with grey in some places.

Terrified. They didn't look like the trance zombie like eyes of the rest of Derry. Mike felt his breath catch in his throat. *He wasn't medicated.* He was completely sober. Completely... *there* .

The boy took in a sharp breath, his body shuddering. “ *Help me. Please.* ”

Mike's hand fell from its perch on the handlebar, his heart hammering. There were others out there around his age who were unmedicated. One of them was standing here right now in front of him. They needed -

The sound of a car screeching to a halt at the other end of the alleyway reached them and the boy jumped, head whipping around as he squinted down the alleyway. Mike's hand flew to his handlebar again. “ *Get on.* ”

The boy scrambled into action, moving quickly and swinging a leg over the bike to climb on behind Mike who reached back and grabbed his arms, moving them around his waist and pressing the boy's hands to his stomach in a simple silent order. *Hang on.* And the moment the boy's fingers had sunk into Mike's shirt they were moving, Mike veering them off to the left towards a patch of trees.

He felt the boy relax the further away from the town they moved, the grip on the stomach of his shirt loosening. His body leaned easily against Mike's, forehead pressed in the space between his shoulder blades. He could hear the muttering and feel the sharp breaths as the boy tried to regulate his breathing.

“What's your name?” Mike asked, trying to focus the boy's attention on anything but his attempts to breathe; to try and ease the panic that was gripping at him like a vice.

There was another sharp breath as the boy gulped down some air. “Eddie.”

“Okay, Eddie, I'm Mike, and you're gonna be okay. You're safe now. Everything is okay.”

Mike peddled as fast as he could, asking Eddie random questions that

would keep his attention until he made it back home. It did the trick, and Eddie's breathing was calm by the time they'd reached the farmhouse. Eddie climbed unsurely off the bike, shifting on the spot to try and keep warm. Mike hastily climbed off, letting the bike fall to its side on the ground before wrapping a hand around Eddie's wrist and pulling up the porch and shoving the door open to drag him inside.

"Mom? *Mom!* " Mike called, releasing Eddie's wrist and leaving him alone in the kitchen.

Eddie remained rooted the spot, attempting to rifle through what had happened in his mind. His mom knew. She *knew* . She'd been snooping through his backpack and found the medicine container and inside of it, the half taken pills that dangled him on the edge of reality and fiction just like it did with Stan. She was going to take him away. Away from his friends. To Juniper. He'd done the only thing he could think of.

He ran.

He could already feel the panic rising again as he recalled yanking on the hoody and shoes and jumping from his window onto the roof just under it before sliding his way down the drainpipe and taking off, his chest seizing and throat closing. It was becoming hard to breathe, and the room around him was starting to spin.

"Eddie!" Mike had returned, pressing his hands firmly to Eddie's shoulders. "Eyes on me. Breathe in; three seconds. Hold in for three, then out for three. Keep your eyes on me."

Eddie did as Mike instructed, repeating the process a few times with Mike's encouragement until Mike had dropped his hands back at his side and was no longer trying to calm him. As the rest of the kitchen slowly ebbed its way back into his vision, Eddie vaguely became aware that there was a woman standing just behind Mike, concern clear on her face as she watched their interaction.

This was not what Jessica Hanlon had expected when Mike had told her there was a problem. She had been expecting Ministry officials to be ready to tear the house down because Mike had been careless

somehow and caught out. She had not been expecting a terrified and barely dressed boy to be standing in her kitchen having a panic attack.

“There, you’re okay now.” Mike said, trying to keep his voice level and soothing.

Jessica approached them, kneeling in front of Eddie and taking his hands in her own. “Do you want to tell us why you were out there alone unmedicated? We won’t turn you in, but we can’t help you unless we know what’s wrong.”

Eddie took in a shaky breath, focusing on the hands that were gently gripping his own, thumbs brushing against his knuckles to soothe him. “I - my mom knows - she - I only take half. I was being weaned off... she knows... found out... she’s gonna send me away. She’s gonna -”

“Hey, no, no.” Jessica scrambled to her feet and released his hands in favour of wrapping her arms around him. “It’s okay. You’re not going anywhere that you don’t want to. Mike’s gonna take you upstairs, find you some clothes, and you’re gonna get dressed, take a nap, and then come back down and have something to eat, okay? Can you do that?”

Eddie nodded, his fingers curling around the hem of his sleeves. Jessica smiled, releasing him and running a hand gently against the back of his head before stepping away to busy herself with dinner. Mike motioned for Eddie to follow him and Eddie moved quickly across the room, almost tripping over his laces in the process. If Mike noticed, he was good at keeping it to himself, leading Eddie up to his room and motioning for him to take a seat.

Eddie did, perching on the edge of the bed and pushing the hem of his hoody between his legs, not that it did much to cover the fact he was only wearing boxers. And it wasn’t like anyone in the house hadn’t already noticed that either. Eddie appreciated that he hadn’t mentioned while he was rummaging through his closet. He only looked back at Eddie once, furrowing his brow before continuing his search.

Mike returned to Eddie a moment later with a pair of shorts that look like they'd be just a little long for him and a shirt that was *definitely* too big. "Sorry they're a bit big. Smallest clothes I have."

"They're great - um - thank you... for helping me. We both know you didn't need to."

"Yeah, I was just gonna leave you out there in some back alleyway barely dressed. You should put those on... get some rest. I'll wake you when dinner is done."

Mike turned to leave and Eddie reached out quickly, his hand curling around Mike's wrist. His gripe was loose which would allow Mike to pull away if the contact bothered him. "Can - um... could you stay? I don't... I don't wanna be alone right now."

Mike felt his chest lurch at that, his face softening as he turned towards Eddie again. "Sure, Eddie. I'll stay with you."

Mike never knew how much Eddie appreciated that he kept his word and stayed, turning his back while Eddie pulled on the clothes he'd had handed him, only turning back around once he was sure Eddie was dressed. He definitely never knew how much Eddie appreciated it when Mike let him cling to him, curling up against him to sleep.

Mike shook him awake at six and Eddie stumbled out of the bed, following him sleepily to the kitchen where Jessica was plating up food and bringing it to the table. There was a man already sitting there that Eddie didn't recognise, but it wasn't hard to figure out that it was Mike's dad.

William Hanlon looked up from his plate, a look of understanding and concern written on his features. "You look a lot better than my wife described you."

"Eat up Eddie." Jessica said, ushering Eddie into a chair across from Mike.

"They're gonna be looking for him soon." William said, casting a concerned glance to Jessica. "There's already Ministry people alerted about an unmedicated boy."

"I know." Jessica placed a final plate at the end of the table, directly across from her husband before taking a seat. "I already put a call in with M. She'll pick him up sometime tonight and then he'll be safe with the resistance. Which reminds me. Mike... I want you to go with him."

Mike dropped his fork with a clatter onto his plate. " *What .*"

"This town isn't safe anymore. They'll be checking everyone after this like last time and I can't keep you locked up on this farm until they *stop* looking. I know it's a few months earlier than we'd agreed on but *it's just not safe here anymore*. I need you leave when Eddie does, stay out of this town, and stay safe."

"I -" Mike resigned with a heavy sigh. "Yeah okay. I'll go."

After dinner, Mike packed two bags as instructed by Jessica; one for himself and one for Eddie, who was standing in the middle of the bedroom with no belongings other than his dead phone. Eddie had constantly insisted that Mike didn't need to pack him anything, didn't need to *give* him anything, but Mike wasn't having it, and Eddie soon found himself standing in the middle of the Hanlon kitchen with his too big hoody, unmatching shoes and a backpack loosely on his shoulder.

"Everything will be fine." Jessica said, smothering her son in as much love as she could. "M will get you out and everything will be explained to you on the other side. We'll stay in contact. They'll tell you how."

A soft knock on the door pulled Jessica from her son, a fond smile on her face as she slowly detached herself from him. Eddie's hand tightened around the strap of his backpack at the sound of voices. The voice of the woman at the door slowly sunk in and Eddie's head snapped in its direction to find Maggie Tozier stepping into the kitchen.

Eddie couldn't stop himself from moving, rushing across the kitchen and throwing his arms around her waist. Maggie's arms wrapped around him, her fingers brushing through his hair. "We've been so worried about you. Richie's been *insufferable* because you haven't

called or text all day. Why didn't you come straight to us?"

"I thought -" Eddie's arms tightened around Maggie his fingers digging into her coat. "I thought it would be the first place she'd go so I just... I kept running."

"It's okay, you're okay." Maggie soothed, tightening her own arms around him. "I'm gonna get you out of here. Tonight. Both of you. You'll never have to see this place again."

"What about the -"

"Soon, Eddie. Real soon."

Eddie nodded, finally releasing Maggie who thanked Jessica and Mike for being the ones to find him, and as Eddie approached the car on the Hanlon drive, he became painfully aware that he wouldn't be able to see his friends for a while. He wouldn't be able to say goodbye to them.

Mike clamped a hand on his shoulder, warm and comforting as the panic rose in Eddie for the third time that day. "It's okay Eddie."

No, it wasn't. But it would be. He had to trust Maggie. He *did* trust Maggie.

Magie drove silently, her hands gripping her steering a little too hard. She already knew that things were getting worse. She wouldn't be able to wait until graduation to get Richie and the others out of Derry where it was safe. The plans were changing fast, and she needed to get them out sooner.

A lot sooner.

8. Chapter 8

Eddie stirred once in a while to the darkness of an unknown car that was illuminated by the orange of street lights as they passed them. The last few hours had been a blur, and he could barely remember getting out of Derry. All he could remember were tunnels, darkness, water, and the beam of flashlights. There was a thick and warm unknown jacket placed over him, and it took Eddie's brain a moment to realise that he was lying down in the backseat, his head in Mike's lap while Mike stared out of the window at the passing scenery. He didn't know how he'd ended up in this position, but Mike didn't seem to mind it.

Mike glanced down when he felt Eddie stir to stretch out his arm which was overcome with an annoying tingling sensation. "You okay?"

Eddie nodded, not trusting his voice enough to speak. It had been a long five hours of car rides and blurred movements. Mike seemed to understand, placing a hand to the jacket that was covering Eddie like a makeshift blanket and rubbing a soothing circle against his shoulder. Eddie closed his eyes, relaxing under the comforting touch and allowing sleep to take over him again.

It was around midday when Mike shook him awake gently as the car pulled into a driveway. Now that he'd managed to get some decent sleep and was more awake, he was able to tell that the person who had been driving the car was Wentworth. He reached for the bag on the passenger's seat before climbing out, opening the door for Mike and handing it over. Eddie stumbled out of the car, rubbing at one of his eyes and looking up at the house.

It was four floors, reminding Eddie of the old abandoned Neibolt house except that it looked more comforting and inviting than that place ever had. There was a wooden porch with a swinging bench on it, and there was a boy sitting there with a notebook in his lap and textbook in front of him. Eddie vaguely recalled the boy from missing posters the ministry of joy had pasted all over Derry. Ben, maybe?

"This is an inbetween house." Wentworth explained, leading Eddie

and Mike towards the house. “We bring people here in an emergency until we can locate a place for them. You’ll be here until K can find you somewhere. We’ll get you settled with a room each and enrolled into a nearby school to finish your education just like Ben there. K will tell you how to contact people back in Derry without getting them caught by the Ministry. My job is only to make sure you settle in.”

They were at the door now and Wentworth raised a hand, knocking in a rhythm that Eddie could easily deduce was some kind of code. It was hurried, sharp, and firm; probably one used for an emergency. Eddie expected that, that was something you *had* to do in this situation. What he didn’t expect, however was the person who had opened the door to greet them.

“Dad?”

Richie hated Mondays. Mondays were the signal that he had five days of hell pretending to be happy and upbeat to make sure that no one found out he was unmedicated. He found it easier to fake being on the medication now because for the first time since he was twelve he was *genuinely* happy again. *Stan* did that to him. Having Stan back in his life brought out the happiness that he didn’t think he’d feel again.

That happiness quickly faded when he saw the yellow and black posters that were decorating walls and lockers:

MINISTRY OF JOY EXAMINATION

Due to the recent discovery of an unmedicated student of Derry High School all students are required to take an emergency examination to ensure that everyone is taking *Pennywise* .

Have you been taking your medication like a good student?

Richie ran for the bathroom, slamming the door open and stumbling inside, startling Bill. “Did you guys see those fucking posters?”

“Obviously,” Beverly muttered, flicking her cigarette into the toilet and flushing it, “they’re all over the school. We won’t have any problems but...”

Stan's fingers flexed against the counter he was leaning on. "I might. How the fuck am I supposed to pass this exam, Rich?"

"You're gonna fake it." Richie said, sounding determined. "These exams will give you questions and you just have to tick the answer that makes out you're overly excited or is a *good social conduct*. It's okay to get a couple wrong. Medication wears off and wavers. As long as you can pull a ninety-five percent, you're good. You can do this Stan."

Stan nodded, taking in a shaky breath. "Right, I can do this."

"If you're not sure... take a pill. That's what Eddie did last time. And then... come back to us when it wears off." Richie placed a hand to Stan's arm, giving a squeeze. "We'll be right here in the quiet waiting."

It wasn't until after lunch that seniors were forced to take their exam. They were the last ones of the day, filed into the old lecture theatre that was only used for examinations. Richie sat near the back, leg bouncing nervously. He could see Beverly across the room, twiddling her pencil in her hand, and a couple of rows in front of her, Bill was drumming his fingers against the table. Looking to the front of the room, he could see Stan, and he could tell just from a glance he hadn't decided to take his medication.

The Ministry official at the front of the room stood with her hands behind her back, a mask with a permanent smile over her face. Some new invention of the Ministry no doubt. "Begin!" Her voice was cheerful and preppy, hitting Richie's core in a way that made him flinch.

He looked down at the booklet in front of him. *Happy is the town with no past*. He scrawled his name onto the line in the middle and opened the booklet, staring at the first question.

1. *If you want to fit in with the rest of Derry you should:*

A) *Say Hello to everyone you meet or give them a smile!*

B) *Static!*

Richie quickly ticked the first box and moved on.

1. *You go to the store and find the item you went for is out of stock. How does that make you feel?*

A) *It's just an item! I can come back for it any time!*

B) *STATIC. STATIC. STATIC.*

Beverly hummed quietly to herself, ticking the first answer. The exam never changed. It was always the same fifty questions and it was easy to fake. The only people who would have trouble were those not adjusting to being off their medication or had just come off it. They weren't designed to catch people who had been off the medication for as long as they had. Part of her worried about Stan though. He still suffered the side effects of being off the medication, but at the same time, he was doing pretty well off it. The exam could go either way for him, and she hoped that it didn't tip towards the bad end and have him dragged off to Juniper.

1. *Your teacher assigns more homework than you expected. How do you react?*

A) *More homework? Perfect! I love work!*

B) *Oh god the static!*

Stan knew he should have taken a pill or at least half of one before coming into the exam. The only thing he could hear ringing in his head right now was the static from the lack of medication. His could feel his hand shaking, see it moving toward the second answer. The Ministry official was wandering the room, checking on people as they worked through the exam. He couldn't answer B. He *couldn't*. B would land him in Juniper. But his hand was already placing the tip of the pencil down against the box for the second answer.

He shot his hand up quickly, ticking the first box and exhaling shakily.

1. *Your parental figures asks you to pick up more chores around the house. What do you do?*

A) *Take them of course! Who wouldn't? It's good manners!*

B) *Make the static stop!*

Eddie had no idea that while he was free on the outside, his friends had spent an entire day wondering where he was and were being forced to take an exam because Sonia had reported him as an unmedicated, something that he'd discovered over the weekend she'd done with his father too which had prompted him to work for the resistance from *outside* of Derry. Sonia had always told him that he refused to take his medication and had been dragged off to Juniper. That he should never go and see him.

But that was just because there *wasn't* a Frank at Juniper for him to see. He was here on the outside. Free. And Eddie was free now too. But he worried. He worried about how his friends were doing back in Derry. It didn't matter if he'd only been gone a day. Not being around them and knowing it would be a while before he saw them again made him anxious. It made it hard to focus on anything, not knowing if they were still okay.

The only thing he *did* know was that there was absolutely no doubt Sonia *had* reported him. Mike's father had said it himself. The Ministry had been alerted the same day Sonia had discovered his half taken pills.

It just wasn't something that he had to deal with anymore. He was safe in the halfway house with other kids that Richie's parents had managed to sneak out of Derry. First there was Ben. Eddie vaguely remembered him from Derry a year back. He was a kind person with a poetic soul. His bedroom was plastered in postcards on which he'd scrawled an array of self made poems, books littering almost every surface of the room. He loved to read. It was his passion.

There was Edward too, another 'missing' boy who had broken free of the happiness dug. Eddie couldn't remember much about him, and his room didn't give him much to go by. Edward was leaving today, off to a better family and fully weaned off the medication. There were boxes littering his room, filled with anything he'd acquired since coming here. Eddie hadn't bothered learning the names of the others. Most of them were getting ready to leave soon so there was no point. There was only himself, Mike, and Ben who would be here after the week was out.

"Here." Frank placed a glass of water on Eddie's nightstand with a small pill cup, drawing his attention away from the book he'd been trying to read before he'd zoned out. "It's medication designed to help. It stops the static and weans you off faster. We give it to everyone."

Eddie reached out for the pill cup, tossing the pill back and swigging his water.

"You're worried aren't you?" Frank asked, taking a seat on the bed.

"About Richie mostly." Eddie admitted, closing his book and setting it aside. "He's never been on the medication. What if... look I know that mom reported me... what if they find out that he's another person who isn't medicated? What if they find out the others -"

Frank reached out, petting at Eddie's leg. "Hey, they've managed to last this long without getting caught Eddie, and they'll last a little longer. They'll be here in a month and everything will be okay."

"Yeah... they're all strong. They can handle this."

"That's the spirit. Now how about we go and get you some clothes? You can't just keep wearing Mike's things forever."

Richie stared at his parents, slowly letting their words sink in. Eddie was gone. They'd taken him away from Derry two days ago with another boy who had found him unmedicated and panicking. He was on the outside now. Free. He was on the outside with his *dad* was on the outside; a man Sonia had convinced him was dead for most of his life.

"Richie -"

Richie raised a hand, cutting off whatever his mother was about to say. "He's okay right?"

Maggie smiled, reaching out and cupping her son's face. "I promised you didn't I? I told you I would make sure all your friends are safe. Now, the plan changed since the Ministry has been alerted about Eddie. We're being watched. Your friends are being watched. If they catch you they'll be using their Plan B; the masks. Time for us to use

Plan C, Richie.”

“Got it.”

“That’s my boy. You’ve been so strong and patient through all of this. Soon. Soon you won’t have to keep hiding who you are, who you love. Go get them.”

Richie nodded, pulling away from his mother and taking off up the stairs. Maggie’s ‘study’ was just a rouse. Ducking under the desk, Richie grabbed a backpack and slow unzipped it to check it was the right one, staring at the latex mask with the permanent smile. The Ministry had invented them for people who had an allergy to something in the pills, and for those who were more difficult. Unlike the ones the Ministry used, these ones didn’t mess with the brain and implant the fake happiness into them.

But they made the wearer *look* happy and that’s what they needed.

Being a ‘Ministry official’, Maggie had been able to swipe some and disarm the electronic device inside of them, stashing them away in case of an emergency. This definitely counted. He shouldered the backpack and jogged back down the stairs to living room where his mother was.

“Remember, give one to each of your friends.” Maggie instructed. “I have to go do ‘emergency work’ so I won’t be home until later.” She picked up her own mask from the counter and slowly slid it on. “Stay safe.”

9. Chapter 9

Stan stared down at the mask in his hand, fingers digging into the latex material. These masks were used to force compliance. From what Richie had told him, if you seemed beyond the help of the Ministry's normal methods, they used these. If the device had not been disabled, putting it on would literally show him a happy world of rainbows and god only knew what else. There was a small tube attached to the side which was empty, but usually it would be filled with laughing gas. It was a complete simulated happy, and the Ministry believed that as long as you were happy you wouldn't be causing trouble. All the advancements in technology and *this* was what they did with it. They used it to force one single emotion on them constantly.

His parents had asked about the mask once they'd seen it in his hand, and they'd been happy to accept the story that Stan was following the rules and had asked someone for help when he felt like his medication was no longer working. The fact he'd barely passed the surprise exam had helped with that. Taking it off his medication had seemed like a stupid idea when they exam had been handed back out, but the moment he needed an alibi it had worked in his favour.

Stan slowly rose from his desk, crossing his room and ducking next to the bed to grab the backpack he'd stored under there. It had been three weeks since Eddie had left, and now it was time for them to leave this place too. The mask would ensure that no one would stop him on his way to meet up with his friends. That was Plan C. They had each, one at a time, taken a day or two off school under the guise of being sick, only to return wearing the masks. Only the Ministry workers knew the results of the exam other than the student the exam belonged to. The students and teachers were not permitted to know.

To them, it looked as though the Ministry had taken them away for further evaluation before letting them return with the masks. The masks meant no forced smiles. It meant not having to *look* happy. They just had to sound it, and that would be over soon.

The buzz of his phone on the nightstand drew his attention and Stan

reached out for it instantly, knowing without even looking at the name that it would be Richie.

Time to go, love.

Stan locked his phone and tucked it into his pocket, shoulder his bag and pulling the mask over his face. It was now or never.

Getting by his parents was easy. They were so absorbed in watching 'Derry fun hour', a show that played all day every day and looked like a bad acid trip of bright colours, that they didn't even notice when Stan stood in the living room doorway behind them. He would miss them, a lot, he knew he would. They weren't bad people. They were just following the rules. They didn't know any better. But he knew. He knew what the outside was like. He knew what genuine emotion felt like. The real world was dark, but he couldn't go back to the bright colours and the buzz that that the medication sent pulsing through his body. It wasn't real.

Stan craved reality now. He craved the happy feeling, but not the simulated one that he'd been on before. It even *felt* fake now. Richie showed him what genuine happiness felt like whenever their arms brushed in the hallways at school or his foot nudged Stan's under the cafeteria table, or they were lying on Richie's bed tangled together, and even the night they'd spent together with Richie shaking and moaning under him.

Screw this town. Screw the medication. Screw the Ministry of Joy. Stan hooked his keys up next to the door and placed an envelope addressed to his mother on the table just under the hooks before he quietly left the house, closing the door behind him with one final glance over his shoulder before he walked off down the street. This place wasn't home anymore. It couldn't be. Not while it constantly fell to the illusion of the medication.

Richie was waiting for him at the end of the street, duffle bag slung over his shoulder with his hand hooked into the strap. Like Stan, he too was wearing one of the masks that Maggie had given Richie to hand out. There was no sign of Beverly or Bill anywhere nearby, but Stan supposed that this was part of the plan. If they were in a group, someone was *bound* to notice them. But just two of them at a time? It

was less suspicious. He'd learned *that* much over the last couple of months. The bigger the group, the more intensely people watched you.

The walk towards Richie was agonizingly slow, and Stan wanted nothing more than to break into a run to get to him faster. But that was suspicious too. Running meant you were hiding something, which they definitely were since they were planning to leave, but the rest of the town didn't need to know that, and they didn't need the eyes of patrols on them because they were moving too fast. It was better to walk, though Stan did pick up the pace a little, enough that it looked like he was a fast walker, slowing down until he stopped in front of Richie.

Even with the mask on Stan could read Richie. He was concerned, and that made him wonder how he looked to Richie right now. "Are you okay?"

"I'm -" Stan could hear his voice threatening to break. The thought of leaving his parents behind like this was weighing on him harder than he thought was possible. He swallowed back the tears, shaking his head. "Can we just go?"

"Sure thing, love." Richie reached between them as they crossed the street, slowly linking his fingers with Stan's. It was dark enough that no one would notice they were doing this anyway. "We're gonna meet the others there."

"Where?"

Richie didn't answer for a moment, adjusting the grip on his bag. "You'll see soon."

Beverly did everything in her power to remain quiet as she snuck through the apartment hallway. Her mother was already in bed, sleeping soundly after a long work shift, and the last thing that she wanted to do was wake her up. She turned the key slowly in the door, wincing at the click that echoed through the living room, falling silent to listen for signs of her mother waking. There was none, and Beverly opened the door a small fraction before she turned the key again so the door would lock behind her as she left. Grabbing the

backpack from by the door, Beverly stepped out onto the metallic staircase and slowly pulled the door shut behind her.

It hurt to leave her mother alone like this, but it was for the best. Eventually someone would notice that she wasn't medicated, and it was better in this fucked up town to be known as the mother of someone who had seemingly vanished than to be known as the mother of someone who broke the rules. Especially when she was already known as the woman whose husband had snapped and stopped taking his medication. Beverly reached into her backpack and grabbed the mask Richie had given to her, casting one final glance at the door behind her.

"I'm sorry."

Being on the outside of Derry was weird. Eddie had never felt so damn free. Not only did he *not* have to take the medication that gave him the fake happiness like his entire hometown did, but he was free from the suffocating presence of his mother who watched him with a hawk like gaze. He'd spent his time off the medication hiding pills under his tongue so that his mother thought he'd taken them before biting them in half and weening himself off them slowly. Now, however, he only had to take the medication that helped their bodies get *off* the pills Derry had been forced into his system, and by the end of the month he wouldn't even be on those. According to his dad, he was adjusting to reality pretty well, a factor he had boiled down to Eddie having being weening himself from the medication rather than stopping cold turkey.

But none of this stopped him worrying about the others who were still in Derry.

"You worry so much I can hear you across the hallway."

Eddie looked up from his notebook to the doorway where Mike was leaning against the frame with a smile. "I hate not knowing."

Mike's expression softened and he pushed himself up from the doorframe, crossing the room and climbing onto the bed next to Eddie. "I know. I hate not knowing about my parents. The Ministry probably cracked down on them when they realised I went missing

when you did.” He reached for Eddie’s biology book, flicking it shut with ease. “Homework isn’t going to make it go away. Talk to me.”

Eddie sighed, leaning into Mike who curled an arm around his shoulders. “I hate not knowing because it makes me think something happened to them. I should have been more careful. If I’d never been found out I’d still be there with them and I’d *know* . I sent a letter to Richie and I didn’t get a response. It just makes it worse. It makes me wonder -”

“Well, I don’t know this Richie like you do,” Mike gave Eddie’s shoulder a squeeze, drawing him tighter into his side, “but from what you’d told me, I don’t think anything happened to him. You said he’s always taking care of his boyfriend, right? It could be that, or maybe it’s not safe for him to send a letter right now. Plussss, you’re forgetting that they have to sneak the letters out through a resistance member. Maybe there’s no one who can sneak out right now.”

“Yeah, you’re right. They managed this long, and they’re probably fine. I’m just not used to not being with them. I’ll hear from them soon and Richie will have a good reason that he didn’t respond before then, or maybe the letter is late, because I know Maggie would make sure he got it.”

“That’s the spirit.” Mike nudged Eddie’s cheek gently with his fist. “There’s the Eddie I know.”

“I told him in the letter.” Eddie reached up, tangling his fingers with Mike’s. “About you. Us.”

Mike rubbed his thumb against the back of Eddie’s hand. “You didn’t have to. I know you’re still getting used to this.”

“I wanted to tell them. I don’t want you to feel like we have to sneak around whenever they’re brought here. I *never* want you to feel like a secret I have to keep because you’re not. You’re my boyfriend and I want people to know that.”

“That’s the first time in the two weeks we’ve been dating that you’ve called me that.”

“I’m gonna do it again, *boyfriend*. ”

Mike chuckled, raising his free hand to Eddie’s head and ruffling his hair. “You’re so fucking adorable Eddie. I’m glad I met you - that you ran out in front of me that day.”

Eddie smiled up at him; soft and genuine. “I’m glad I met you too. I just wish you didn’t almost have to run me over for us to meet.”

Stan stared at the huge dark opening in front of him, the sound of dripping water reaching his ears. By now they had met up with Beverly and Bill in the Barrens, but none of them had stopped walking to say hi or hug. Richie had simply tightened his hand around Stan’s and continued to move, and now they were here, standing in a straight line of four people like a group of warriors in a game ready to take out some unknown beast. Richie reached for his duffle bag with his free hand, unzipping it and pulling out a flashlight which he handed to Beverly, reaching back in for a folded map of some kind. He handed *that* to Beverly too, trusting her to navigate in the darkness.

“Wait... we’re going in *there* ?” Stan asked, his head snapping around to look at Richie. He couldn’t be serious could he?

“It’s the most discreet way in and out of Derry.” Richie said, handing another flashlight to Bill and then one to Stan before finally taking one for himself. “Mom wanted to take us through here. I told her not to. Someone had to stay home. Dad’s on the other side waiting.”

“Then we won’t keep him waiting any longer.” Beverly said, unfolding the map and turning on her flashlight.

Stan took in a breath, pushing down the creeping fear, and then he finally moved, allowing Richie to pull him into the sewer pipe with Beverly in front to lead the way and Bill at the rear of the group.

None of them noticed the four ministry officials who had been following them since the moment that Richie had stepped out of his house.